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AUTHOR Cruzeiro, Patricia A.; Morgan, Robert L.
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Entry Year Assistance Program (EYAP), a mentoring program for novice teachers, offered by the School of Education at Chadron State College (Nebraska). The program supports beginning teachers who are geographically isolated in Nebraska's panhandle. A discussion of the theoretical basis for teacher mentoring includes guidelines that can be used to ensure support for neophyte teachers. EYAP is an example of a partnership between a college of education and local school districts. Local school district officials participated in developing EYAP in 1985. Program features include visitation by faculty to beginning teachers at their respective school sites, seminars held on campus, and luncheons for new teachers. The fact that the new teachers decide on the seminar topics to be discussed is an especially positive aspect of the program. Concerns of the beginning teachers become areas for program improvement. In this collaborative approach to beginning teacher mentoring, all participants come to share and solve problems. Recently, preservice teachers have begun attending the seminars as observers who take notes and report back to their methods classes on what they learned about the first year of teaching. Legislation has mandated teacher mentoring in Nebraska, and EYAP has been chosen by the Nebraska State Education Association as the model to replicate for state mentoring. Contains 22 references. (CDS)

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Patricia A. Cruzeiro
Chadron State College
Chadron, NE
Robert L. Morgan
University of Nebraska at Kearney
Kearney, NE

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MENTORING: A COLLEGIAL PARTNERSHIP

Introduction

Generally, neophyte teachers who work with a mentor or maintained continuous contact with other first-year teachers appreciate support (DePaul, 1998). This kind of support may determine whether the rural special educator continues working in the profession. Consideration of this is vital, as the number of new personnel in special education has been declining while the number of students in special education has increased (Bowen, & Klass, 1994). In addition, rural teachers are more likely to leave professional education than nonrural teachers (Stern, 1994).

Although many school districts sustain mentoring programs, they tend to be located in large, suburban or urban locales. The opportunity for such programs in rural and remote schools may not exist. The rural district, strapped for personnel and resources, has a dilemma. For example, many small and rural school districts, including the numerous one-room schools, exist in the panhandle of Nebraska, an area of approximately 41,000 square miles. For this type of district, a regional, college-based mentoring program may be part of the solution for teacher mentoring. Such a close working relationship between local education agencies and teacher preparation programs would benefit these new practitioners (Bowen, & Stearn, 1992).

The School of Education at Chadron State College (Chadron, Nebraska) has a mentoring program for novice teachers, the Entry Year Assistance Program (EYAP). The School of Education assigned a coordinator to establish links to Panhandle school administrators to offer support for the beginning teacher. This paper focuses on EYAP.

Rural focus

"Geographical isolation" is the term one applies to Nebraska's Panhandle. Chadron State College is the only four-year, higher-education institution in the western part of Nebraska. The closest higher education institutions relative to Chadron State's position which offer education programs are Black Hills University, Spearfish, SD; the University of Wyoming, Laramie; the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley; and the University of Nebraska at Kearney. The closest major city is Denver, located about 300 miles southwest from Chadron. Lincoln, the capitol, lies 423 miles east. Local mileage alone is remarkable. Chadron to Scottsbluff is 100 miles away; Chadron to Alliance is a 62 mile ride.

Furthermore, within the state of Nebraska one finds 320 Class I school districts (personal communication with Data Department, Nebraska Department of Education, January 8, 1999). These districts are elementary schools for students in kindergarten through 8th grade. Not until 1992 did these one- or two-room school district's autonomous school boards contract for a principal. Since 1992 when the Nebraska Department of Education mandated a part-time principal for the accredited Class I schools, these school boards have contracted with a variety of certified personnel in the region to serve as elementary principals. The principals already are full-time principals in neighboring school districts, full-time college or university faculty, or county superintendents.

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On the economic side of the picture, funding for education is an issue. Several states including Nebraska have spending "lids" applied legislatively to the school district budget. The lack of access to resources, both financial and personnel, and professional growth opportunities for teachers is a problem. To further compound the situation, the school administrator is pulled in many directions and doesn't always have the necessary time to assist the beginning teacher. One may question whether part-time principals find time to function as leaders in the management and "operation of the school and the improvement of curriculum and instruction" (Title 92, Nebraska Department of Education, 1996, 6).

Theoretical basis for teacher mentoring

Finding and retaining qualified teachers to instruct in some of our schools is becoming nearly impossible. The retirement of experienced teachers with no new teachers to follow puts school districts at risk. If hired, about 30% of beginning teachers do not continue in the profession beyond the second year; almost 40% of teachers, including academically talented ones, leave teaching within the first five years (Odell and Ferraro, 1992).

To replace the retiring teacher, the school administrator needs to hire competent, talented individuals. The second step is to "help novice teachers develop staying power" (Halford, 1998). Research has shown that one way to retain teachers and offer support for the novice teacher has been through the mentoring process (Halford, 1998; McKenna, 1998; Odell and Ferraro, 1992; Stedman and Stroot, 1998). What happens to the teacher in the first year of the profession "seems to be more positively related to teacher retention than is ...prior academic performance or adequacy of ...preparation programs" (Chapman's study as cited in Odell and Ferraro, 1992).

Mentoring is not a new concept. In the Homeric Odyssey one reads of Telemachus' Mentor, the individual who advised, helped, and guided Odysseus's son (Lasley, 1996). Historic figures such as Socrates and Plato, Freud and Jung have been mentored (Odell, 1990). In more recent times, one reads of mentoring in the business world where mentors guide and sponsor protégés. More specific to the current educational setting are the formal mentoring programs which have existed since the 1970s. Moreover, legislative requirements of many of the states mandate mentoring for the novice teacher. Nebraska is such a state (Title 92, Nebraska Department of Education, 1998).

Mentoring is used to assist new teachers orient themselves to the profession (Hughes, & Ubben, 1994). There appears to be a wide range of interpretation when defining mentoring (Ganser, 1998). Glatthorn (1990) provides a number of staff development guidelines that can be used to insure meaningful support for the neophyte teacher:

1. Recognizing time constraints of new teachers,
2. Promoting consideration of self-identified needs of the teacher,
3. Emphasizing interpersonal experiences,
4. Promoting peer support,
5. Offering the opportunity for new teachers to share their perspective,
6. Considering new teacher expectations,
7. Promoting personal reflection, and
8. Promoting cooperative and constructive interactions.

The literature review for teacher mentoring has revealed consistently similar information. Reality shock (Odell, 1990; Veenman, 1984) sets in quickly; the novice is assigned responsibilities of the veteran teacher (Glickman, Gordon, Ross-Gordon, 1995; Odell, 1990). Entry into the world of teaching is sudden (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1993) rather than a gradual transition into the profession with an internship similar to the medical world (Glickman, Gordon, Ross-Gordon, 1995). The novice is thrust into an

experience that too often demoralizes the individual. The "sink or swim" concept becomes the norm (Brock & Grady, 1997; Glickman, Gordon, Ross-Gordon, 1995).

Beginning teachers experience isolation (Feiman-Nemser, 1998; Glickman, Gordon, Ross-Gordon, 1995), problems of classroom management especially with special needs students (Wilson, Ireton, Wood, 1997), student assessment concerns and lack of student motivation (Veenman, 1984), parental problems (Wilson, Ireton, Wood, 1997) including communication (Lovette, 1996), and administrative conflicts (Wilson, Ireton, Wood, 1997). In addition, there are those beginning teachers who teach in an area of preparation for which they are not certified (Lovette, 1996; Odell, 1990).

Novice teachers experience not only the shock of the classroom but also the personal shock of becoming teachers. The safety of the college/university classroom is gone. In its place are school rooms where peers and administrators expect the fledgling teacher to know how to teach and how to handle the day-to-day routine. Stress sets in, and the beginner looks for emotional support (Huling-Austin as cited in Gratch, 1998).

A collegial partnership: The Entry Year Assistance Program

Although a school district may mentor its own teachers, the viability of a college/university mentoring program is not unusual. The collaborative involvement "between a college of education and a local school district" (Odell, 1990, 19) for an extended mentoring program is available. One example of such a partnership is Chadron State College's (Nebraska) Entry Year Assistance Program (EYAP).

In 1985 the Education Department at Chadron State College (CSC) designed, developed, and implemented an Entry Year Assistance Program. Local school districts participated in the program. Beginning teachers were visited twice a year at the respective school sites. In 1988-1989 because of staffing and budgeting considerations, the Department modified the program. Visitations were made--and continue today--in conjunction with undergraduate field experience visitations by faculty members. The visiting college faculty, as they supervise student teachers, often have visited with building principals to determine the progress of student teachers. At that time the college supervisor inquires about new faculty to the building. Beginning teacher names are obtained from the principal. Since 1994 a faculty member has been assigned as the coordinator of EYAP.

From 1994 to the fall of 1997, school visitations continued. However, with a change in faculty responsibilities, a new coordinator was assigned the position. This individual continues the school visitations as she supervises student teachers. However, a new format for EYAP has emerged. Semester seminars have been established on campus, and beginning teachers are invited to attend at no cost.

The process for gleaning new teacher names has modified. Principals still are asked names in the visitation process. However, the coordinator writes letters to all superintendents of local school districts, county superintendents, and educational service unit directors for new teacher names. Also, the recent graduate list from the College's Placement Office is used to determine newly hired teachers by school districts within the service area. Once the names are obtained, the coordinator writes informational letters to the principal, county superintendents, educational service directors, and the beginning teachers explaining the EYAP seminar and the services the College offers to new teachers.

Included along with the new teacher letter has been an invitation to the on-campus seminar for all new teachers. Whether or not the teacher is a graduate from CSC is not an issue; all first year teachers beginning their careers in the Panhandle are invited. The number of teachers who have been identified as beginning teachers varies each year. Some of the first year teachers are Chadron graduates who have

reported their positions as out-of-area (another state or eastern Nebraska). Often they will contact the EYAP coordinator by electronic mail, write a note, or place a telephone call. College education faculty are available as mentors also. The first year teacher, quite often a graduate of Chadron, already has made a link to a faculty member and has sought advice.

From the Fall of 1996 to the Spring of 1998, Chadron State College hosted a teacher luncheon. Last year, and continuing into this year, the Nebraska State Education Association (NSEA) Panhandle District Center for Teaching and Learning has provided for the luncheon. The NSEA uni-serve director and the EYAP coordinator work in conjunction to plan the seminar. Whether the seminar has been CSC's own or in conjunction with NSEA, the format has been similar. A panel of teachers from the College campus including general and special methods instructors, special education and early childhood instructors, and Chadron Public School faculty have worked together to offer suggestions regarding questions and concerns from the new teachers.

As a beginning activity, the newly hired teachers join in a small group brainstorming session during which time they list their concerns regarding their positions and needs. Once collected, the information is grouped into similar headings and a discussion begins. This continues until the noon hour, at which time the entire group adjourns for lunch. Immediately following the meal, a guest speaker addresses the group with an inspirational message. Any issues remaining from the earlier part of the day are addressed. An offer to visit individuals at school sites is made at this time with the stipulation that no evaluations will be made by the visiting College representative.

One additional aspect to the seminar setting had been added in 1998, Process Observers. These individuals are elementary and secondary pre-service teachers who are in their last semester of class work before the field experience. As a group, they meet with the uni-serve director to learn how to listen, take notes, and provide feedback. At the seminar, these individuals sit quietly and take notes. At the conclusion of the day, the Process Observers share what they learned about the first year of teaching. In turn these individuals return to their respective methods classes and share information.

Discussion

Although the EYAP seminar and the follow-up visits to local school districts seems to be working, not all teachers are involved in the mentoring process. However, with the passage of legislation for mandated teacher mentoring, the picture will change. Will it be the EYAP seminar approach of Chadron State College? While there are other programs within the state of Nebraska, the Nebraska State Education Association has selected the Entry Year Assistance Program of Chadron State College the model to replicate for mandated state mentoring.

Several positive findings from EYAP seminars are worth noting. New teachers decide on the topics they discuss. The coordinator facilitates the discussion while the "experts" respond. The focus is not so much on prescribing methods or techniques. Rather, the veteran respondents and college faculty open a dialogue for reflection. What decision the novice makes is his or her decision, but it is a decision made with information gleaned from the seminar.

Because no evaluative judgments are brought to the table and no administrator is present, the new teachers feel secure in sharing their frustrations, concerns and needs. Following are quotes taken from the 1997 and 1998 evaluation forms:

Sharing openly, felt safe.

Collegial atmosphere and the opportunity to freely express concerns.

The ability to bring up real concerns and hear they are concerns others are having. Friendliness and frankness.
I'm not alone nor are my problems unique. Listening to others, their problems and solutions.
Sometimes it helps to just talk about positive and negative experiences.
It was nice to hear from others who also have 1st year jitters!

Information feedback for College faculty and the coordinator is significant. From the questions novices bring to the seminar, College faculty learn what has or has not been crucial in the preparation of teachers at CSC. Broad topics emerge from the brainstorming session and have included the following topic headings: Special Needs Students, Parental Involvement, Violence and Abuse, Acceptance by Staff, Staff Culture, School Board, Administrative Issues, and Substitute Teachers.

Classroom management with emphasis on discipline consistently comes up as a concern, especially for high school and special needs students. Foul language and violent student concerns first appeared on the discussion list in the Spring of 1998; so too did the issue of lawsuits against teachers by parents. Another parental issue was justifying grades and class processes, and poor communication with home. Gang issues, vandalism and ensuing fights and rumbles associated with gang activity have been concerns with teachers serving specific populations. Furthermore, there appears to be a need for more information about special needs students and more specific examples for coping with these students; anger and anger-coping skills; yearly up-dates for school law.

Some thoughts about the format and process were expressed by the novice teachers:
I thought it was an effective way to address issues and concerns influencing first year teachers.
I liked the brainstormed agenda.
Lots of feedback! Possible solutions for areas of concern.
All the different experience levels of the contributors.

For the Process Observers some of their questions were answered. "Listening to what first/second year teachers are experiencing gave me things to think about." "I have a better idea about when I interview for a job and consider a contract."

Feedback regarding college faculty participation was addressed: "I just want to be able to network with CSC staff as needed." "The input from different areas represented by CSC staff was also appreciated." "I thought the faculty were so approachable and helpful."

Several beginning teachers have further visited with college faculty, the EYAP coordinator, or the uni-serve director at a site, or have further discussed issues. In these specific cases, the mentor has tailored support for the teacher (Odell, 1990) without evaluation.

The Process Observers learn a skill and realize how significant the information they hear is to the first year teacher. Sharing with their colleagues in class, the observers bring another dimension to classroom learning; theory becomes reality. Although students will experience a semester of student teaching, the experience is restrictive. The student teacher enters a classroom that already has been organized by a veteran teacher, and discipline is usually in place. Curriculum issues have been resolved, and material selections have been made.

Summary

In the final analysis, whether or not Chadron State College's Entry Year Assistance Program becomes a state-model for teacher mentoring, the faculty of the College are supportive of mentoring and

the process that has assisted novice teachers. The sink-or-swim belief for first-year teachers is not necessary. There are individuals who can and do assist, sometimes by simply offering moral support. The thought that no one is isolated takes on new meaning. Mentoring is a collegial process involving the local school district, College faculty, and the Association.

No only are faculty assisting beginning teachers, they themselves are more cognizant of and responsive to novice teacher needs. Concerns of the beginning teacher become aspects for program improvement. Incorporating areas of concern from the EYAP seminars into the pre-service teacher course work and seminars has proven helpful to the pre-service teacher.

For the uni-serve director, the needs of the new teacher can be more fully addressed in Association orientation for the novice teacher. Furthermore, EYAP has proven to be a vehicle for a collaborative effort between the Association and the College to focus on the development of the beginning teacher and further develop mentoring programs for the novice teacher.

In this collaborative approach to beginning teacher mentoring, all participants come to the table sharing and solving problems. The new teacher is nurtured; mentoring strengthens the beginning teacher and develops security and confidence for the individual (Odell, 1990). The profession may be able to retain quality educators. As one participant indicated, "I am leaving with a positive attitude and renewed spirit."

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